

# Holy Scripture: The Inerrancy Question and Hermann Sasse

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For many Christians the question concerning Holy Scripture's inerrancy is a settled matter. It is so by Scripture's own attestation and not merely as an a priori conclusion drawn from the sovereign God's impeccable nature. The latter is also true, but it is primarily Scripture's own witness concerning its inviolable nature which establishes the fact. Thus inerrancy stands squarely alongside Scripture's teaching of its divine inspiration, authority, and clarity. Whatever assaults have been made against Scripture and its divine attributes by sophisticated arguments drawn from history, linguistics, natural science, and the like, the fact remains that Holy Scripture comes off from every scrap or scrape looking better and more unscathed all the time. If higher criticism had at last

actually succeeded to lay to rest the vaunted excellencies of the Bible, the whole issue would long since have turned up its toes and gone out like the snuff of a candle.

It has not! The matter of *Irrtumslosigkeit*, or inerrancy, which Scripture asserts at various places (Luther cited 2 Tim. 3:16; John 10:35; 2 Pet. 1:21; John 16:13; 1 Thes. 2:13; Gal. 1:9-12; Heb. 6:18; Num. 23:19, among others), may be dismissed as a mere feather on the scale by the out-and-out liberal, but the fact is he still continues to pay it notice. This need not give us pause. What vexes, pains, and chafes more is the fact that from within the ranks of conservative Christianity itself there are voices which support the notion that inerrancy is merely a pious deduction on the part of some of the Bible's most devoted supporters, neither taught by the Scripture itself, nor necessary for its defense as the inspired Word of God.

Thus from among the Bible's friends, eloquent spokesmen regularly appear who argue that nothing is gained by trying to adjudicate or reconcile the Bible's so-called errors or discrepancies. These should simply be granted; the Bible must not be claimed for inerrant authority on matters like pre-history and in things that touch the realm of natural science. Here it must be seen as speaking with time-bound, phenomenological sort of approximation, analogue, or flexibility, and not as though it were calling a spade a spade. Luther, fully aware of reason's tendencies to "spike the guns" and knock the wind out of what Scripture in fact does say

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and teach (also specifically as regards man's marvelous creation), boldly mans the guns for Scripture's account and affirms simply that here it does in fact call a spade a spade as it deals with the history of man's beginnings. It is history, in other words, not merely a form of history, a saga, or myth.

Enter now (1981) a notable volume of carefully tooled essays by a friend of the court, or the conservative side of Lutheran theology as it were, Hermann Sasse. *Sacra Scriptura* bears the sub-title "Studies on the Doctrine of Holy Scripture," published by the Evangelical Lutheran Mission Society of Erlangen and Hermannsburg. The credentials are accordingly as salubrious and beyond reproach as one might wish. Some truly superlative and robust things have emerged and had egress out of these starting-points, author and publisher alike.

Hermann Sasse was a great defender of the Christian faith. His writings and his life bear eloquent testimony to this. Those who knew him personally had only the deepest respect for him. He had few peers in his knowledge of and competence in the area of the history of Christian doctrine. Books like *Here We Stand* and *This Is My Body* will remain classics for years to come. His courage as a confessional Lutheran professor at Erlangen in the midst of often hostile opposition from the scholarly world of so-called "scientific theology" is well known. It cost him his position eventually, as he sided with the confessional forces, joining the *Evangelische Lutherische Kirche* (SELK), the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church which was in fellowship with the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

Few men knew better the terrible effect of the theologizing of the leading liberal lights like Harnack, Troeltsch, and Schweitzer than Sasse did. He was convinced that a Christian teacher of the *pura doctrina evangelii* had to be a faithful searcher in and expositor of the Sacred Scriptures, God's Word. The church's very life grounded itself on the correct interpretation of Scripture. That was its God-given link to the truth of God. There was little question that Sasse supported Scripture's authority because it was grounded on God's inspiration through the prophets and the apostles. This was a truism which he found indelibly inscribed already in the Nicene Creed. The church confessed that the Holy Spirit "spake by the prophets."

Thus it is a puzzling turn of events to find that the last book to issue from the pen of this able defender of the faith, *Sacra Scriptura*, should serve to cloud the reputation Sasse had earned among conservative Lutheran theologians. The book was edited and published posthumously through another respected and conservative scholar, Friedrich Wilhelm Hopf, long-time director of the Mission School of Bleckmar, Germany. Now, too, deceased, Hopf was for years a close

friend and admirer of Sasse. What is Sasse's key thesis or argument? To understand the Bible correctly, Sasse holds that the early chapters of Genesis must be understood not only as pre-history, but as "history of a different sort than we find in the books of Kings and Chronicles." Sasse contends, therefore, that Luther construes these opening chapters of Genesis as factual historical reporting by Moses. According to Sasse, Luther fails to see that he is more dependent upon an ancient pre-historical tradition than upon God's Word as such (pp. 91-111). Sasse comes very close to supporting the views—if in fact he does not do so—of the school of thought which finds these accounts, including also that of Jonah and other stories like it, to be mythological reporting for the sake of the *Heilsgeschichte*, the saving message, or salvation history of God toward sinful mankind.

Actually this is not a new position which Sasse adopted only in his later years. Some of the chapters in this volume were presented earlier, for example, "Luther and the Word of God."<sup>1</sup> In Sasse's considered opinion the defense of Scripture's inerrancy was not only futile but also an evident surrender to Fundamentalism. He minced no words in faulting the LC—MS for defending Scripture's inerrancy, openly criticizing theologians like Franz Pieper, Theodore Engelder, Paul E. Kretzmann, and William Arndt, for leading Missouri down the primrose path to an impossible, absurd, and naive position on Scripture. Instead of trying to reconcile Scripture's so-called "problems," or discrepancies, one should simply live with them as phenomenological happenings. Sasse felt that he had the mind of Luther here. The facts are, however, that Luther can only be claimed for the Pieper-Engelder-Arndt side of the matter.

The appearance of *Sacra Scriptura* has opened old wounds. Defenders of a view on Scripture's inspired nature which allows for a *relatively* inerrant, or infallible, text, to the extent of the delivery of God's saving message through the prophets and the apostles, will obviously find comfort and aid in Sasse's position. With his vast learning Sasse builds a formidable, persuasive case. There are eager listeners ready to claim his views and thank him for them. We are not thinking here of those Lutherans and Lutheran synods that long since have given up on Scripture's inspired nature as the absolutely authoritative, inerrant Word of God. What now worries the confessional Lutheran churches and has torn at their very hearts in recent years of controversy is that the position expounded by Sasse finds harbor, and occasional voice, among theologians who have subscribed to a doctrinal stance in support of the Bible's divinely inspired and inerrant nature. Their respective church bodies publicly confess this position as the Scriptural one, supported by

the Lutheran Confessions. This is true for the LC—MS and it is also true for the church bodies with which Sasse was once a partner, namely, the German Lutheran Free Church, SELK, and, after he moved to Australia, the conservative Lutheran churches there.

Dr. Hans Kirsten, respected leader in SELK for many years and—along with William M. Oesch (now deceased)—a stalwart defender of confessional Lutheran theology on the Oberursel faculty, writes of this dilemma in a recent essay aired in Germany among the Lutheran Free Churches (west and east). It is a sensitive and respectful critique of Sasse's position. Kirsten wants the reader to know that conservative Lutheran theology is deeply indebted to one of the twentieth century's most able scholars and theologians, Hermann Sasse. Thus it is with heavy heart that Kirsten points out that when the "Union Theses" for the Lutheran Free Churches were adopted in 1947-49 and when the comparable Australian theses were adopted in 1956 (both of which unambiguously assert Scripture's verbal inspiration by the Holy Spirit and its inerrant nature), Sasse himself was present and a participant. Dr. Hopf expressly avers the same of his colleague also. Yet quite obviously, as his letters and essays show, Sasse personally maintained a qualified view on the subject, retaining for himself a greatly modified view of Scripture's infallibility.

The publication of *Sacra Scriptura* becomes thus an embarrassment to faithful and loyal members of SELK which was grounded at its very inception and throughout its history upon Scripture's inviolability. Nor can Luther, and certainly not the Confessions of the Lutheran Church, be claimed for a relativized view, one which accommodates itself as it were to the "assured" findings of science. It is unfortunate that Sasse, for whatever reason, portrayed Luther as one who did not have the benefit of modern historical and manuscript findings in regards to the Biblical text. The resultant implication is that Luther was somewhat naive in his handling of given Bible difficulties or apparent contradictions. Those who know Luther realize that the Reformer maintained a very childlike faith and confidence in "the Holy Spirit's book" at the same time that he dealt with its so-called difficulties. Luther as a matter-of-fact had a very profound knowledge of the Biblical text and its so-called difficulties. In comparison, modern scholars are like "babes in the woods." It becomes a caricature of Luther even to imply that he was somewhat limited in his horizon when it comes to Biblical expertise because he happened to live in a day before scientific theology had done its task.

As a true scholar, Luther always remained open to every legitimate finding which actually shed light on any Biblical text or word or fact; but he was absolutely

adamant and vigorously opposed to any challenge or doubting of God's Word. Should anyone, therefore, have the temerity to question what God has written concerning man's creation, or specifically Eve's being "built" from the rib of Adam, Luther thunders against him: "We dare not give preference to the authority of men over that of Scripture! Human beings can err, but the Word of God is the very wisdom of God and the absolutely infallible truth."<sup>2</sup> Luther is forever aware of how his own reason bucks the things of God. That is precisely why he blasts Erasmus for his skeptical attitude over against Scriptural text and authority, countering that "the Holy Spirit is no skeptic."

In another context, Luther in effect is saying, "I wouldn't believe the Jonah account either, I would consider it to be a fable which is to reveal to us God's long-suffering and grace to sinful mankind, at the same time that He retains His wrath against impenitence, if it were not for the fact that the Scripture teaches it as a fact." Even Heinrich Bornkamm acknowledges (though he does not agree with the Reformer) that when Luther reached an impasse in trying to adjudicate the various Bible difficulties he simply bowed his head and buttoned his lips before the Scriptures. These things, states Bornkamm, "only heightened his admiration for the authority of the Bible. For he doubted these assertions as little as he doubted Jonah's stay in the stomach of the whale." He thereupon quotes the salient passage from Luther: "Who would believe it and not consider it a lie and fairy tale, if it were not written in Scripture?"<sup>3</sup> In his great *Commentary on Galatians* Luther similarly states flat out in a number of places that the Scripture does not contradict itself and that "I for my part shall stay with the author of Scripture" rather than with Scripture's foes who think that they must make excuses for it and its so-called errors.<sup>4</sup>

Dr. Kirsten has a valid concern. The same spirit which is illustrated in Sasse's position on Scripture is welling up again in the German Lutheran Free Churches, both in the west and east zones. The question concerning Scripture and its inerrancy threatens anew to drive a wedge between brethren in the faith and to splinter confessional Lutheran synods. The problem is especially acute and divisive for the Lutheran free churches in the east zone, according to Dr. Gottfried Wachler, loyal professor and leader of the struggling seminary in Leipzig.<sup>5</sup> Like Dr. Kirsten, Wachler sees the approach to Scripture's nature and attributes that allows for some of the so-called "assured results" and "harmless" conclusions of higher-critical methodology as an ominous threat. The same phenomenon swept through the LC—MS during the 1960s and 1970s. Some felt that this resulted in part because of the influence of the Bad Boll Conferences after World War II. Ironically it was the LC—

MS itself that had sponsored these conferences as a gesture of reaching out to the shattered remnants of Lutheranism in Germany. It was a case of the hosts being influenced more by the guests than vice versa. The "new theology," to which the German theologians had long since given themselves over, used the language and thought-forms of orthodoxy freighted with the old liberal sense. It sounded as though Scripture's integrity and inspiration were safe and intact, but the facts were quite the opposite. Theologians were using double-speak. Scripture's inspiration and inviolability were in fact being denied.

The effects became noticeable in the LC—MS more and more thereafter, as attacks on Scripture moved from subtle nuances to outright denial of what Scripture in fact taught. The seminaries, particularly St. Louis, were victimized by the new theology. What festered in the ivy-covered halls eventually made its way into the precincts of synodical headquarters. In order for the move "Towards Fellowship" between the LC—MS and the American Lutheran Church (1968-1969) to succeed, it became imperative to assure the respective synods, particularly Missouri, that there was wide consensus, even on the doctrine of Scripture. In order to try to demonstrate the congruent thinking on this article by the theologians of the two church bodies, two ill-starred meetings of representatives of the five seminaries (Capitol, Luther, Wartburg, and the two Concordias, St. Louis and Springfield) were held at Chicago, March 22-23, 1968 and March 21-22, 1969. The official report stated that "the participants rejoice at the underlying unity which pervaded the discussions." The facts actually were quite the opposite, particularly on the doctrine of Scripture and its nature as the divinely inspired, authoritative, and inerrant Word of God. There was absolutely no consensus among these Lutheran theologians, even though all of them were pledged to uphold constitutions supporting that position. As things turned out, the arguments were for the most part between LC—MS participants who were sorely divided. The ALC representatives simply kept silence, even though their writings in the past openly opposed the historic, confessional position on Scripture. Dr. Schiotz has recently explained that it was the prudent, political thing to do, lest the minds of the simple be disturbed among the rank and file members of the synods. Personally, he said, he never supported Scripture's inerrancy.

Why raise these specters again now? "Are they merely specters?" is the prior question! The facts remain that there are proponents of these liberal views on Scripture still present and at work on both sides of the Atlantic. Dr. Kirsten is rightly concerned. Sasse's book throws the issue once more into the center ring. The influence of Sasse on the world scene, especially

among conservative Lutheran theologians and synods, is considerable. Sympathizers are looking for a champion of his proportions. With him they, too, hold that one can at the same time hold that the Holy Scriptures are the inspired Word of God and yet adopt a freer, more flexible attitude towards some of the obviously time-bound, so-called historical sections in the text, and in this way be more in tune with scientific theology as it has come into its own in the respected circles of our day.

Sasse gives this partisan group convenient handles. It is fundamentalistic to hold to Scripture's inerrancy, he states. "We believe in Christ because the Bible says so," is the way the Fundamentalists teach and speak of their faith, Sasse says. The opposite is true; they ought to be saying: "We believe or accept the Bible because of our faith in Christ." It is an unfortunate way of arguing, setting these two things into bi-polar opposition. Luther is happy with neither one by itself. He sees a perfect harmony and in effect says: I know no other Christ than the Christ of the Scriptures; and I know no other Scriptures than the Scriptures which Christ has given us.

Sasse's motives were, no doubt, good. He did not intend to hurt the church of his day. In fact he sincerely believed, as his writing attests, that the way to peace and unity within the Christian church on earth lay with a correct interpretation and understanding of God's Word, Holy Scripture. He thought that he was rendering a service by showing the church how and to what extent it ought to accommodate itself to some of the conclusions of the historical-critical methodology. No doubt other sincere Christian theologians have approached the matter in the same way, without devious intent to overturn the Scriptures or trouble the church. Right motives do not right the wrong, however. The question of Scripture's inerrancy cannot blithely and lightly be swept under the theological rug. Scripture's authority is grounded on its divine inspiration. Inerrancy is integral to the mortar of inspiration. A man's avowal of support for Scripture's inspiration and authority becomes empty denial when he disavows inerrancy.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This had appeared in *Accents in Luther's Theology—Essays in Commemoration of the 450th Anniversary of the Reformation*, ed by Heino O Kadai (St. Louis Concordia, 1967)

<sup>2</sup> *Luther's Works*, Weimar Ausgabe (hereafter cited as WA), vol 42, p 91, Am edition of *Luther's Works* (hereafter cited as LW), vol 1, p 122

<sup>3</sup> Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), p 190 See WA, vol 40, part 1, p 432; LW, vol 26, p. 276

<sup>4</sup> WA, vol 40, part 1, pp 432, 459, LW, vol 26, pp 276, 295

<sup>5</sup> See Gottfried Wachler's statement on Scripture, "The Authority of Holy Scripture," *CONCORDIA JOURNAL* 10 (September 1984) 171-180